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Theatre History I

Fall 2018

Finding Holes, Founding Theaters: An Exploration on Theatre Companies in Nashville

I believe that theatre is created out of necessity—that when we see a need, it is our duty to satisfy that need by any means necessary. There are many ways to pursue this action. Theatre artists can devise a movement piece, write a play, produce a show, teach a class; there are so many different ways that theatre artists can fill the holes found in their community. One way that seems to be coming to light in Nashville is starting a theatre company. There is already an established set of professional theatres in Nashville. Among Nashville actors, these theatre companies—Nashville Repertory Theatre, Studio Tenn, Nashville Children’s Theatre, and The Nashville Shakespeare Festival—are coined “The Big Four.” To the average person, these theatre companies might seem like enough. They are fulfilling a wide range of needs as well as providing a place for directors, designers, and actors to make the leap from amateur to professional. But I, along with many others, see that there are still many holes in Nashville that need to be filled with art. To my knowledge, within the last three years, four companies have been founded—all with a different mission. As someone who has a goal of opening her own theatre company, I wanted to explore what goes on behind the stage and discover why theatre companies—specifically, in Nashville-- continue to be created. To do so, I conducted interviews with head members of theatres of all status—from professional to start-up—to see what I could learn about what it takes to open and run a successful theater and the personal reasons each company had for opening.

Before I dive into the interviews, though, I would like to provide some historical context around the founding of theatre companies. The independent theatre movement in Europe began in the late nineteenth century. In *The Independent Theatre in Europe, 1887 to the Present*, Anna Irene Miller defines the movement as outsiders—amateurs—creating theatre outside of commercial playhouses (2). It included a reform of the modern theatre and a revival of drama in European countries such as France, Germany, and England. In the late 1880's in France, four popular dramatists held a monopoly over French theatre (Ballard 13). Additionally, censors had to approve of plays before they could be produced. At the same time, realism and naturalism began to emerge in literature, and, to some, seemed well-suited for the stage as well. Yet, no commercial theatre would take on the risk of producing such untested material, especially if the censors would not approve of the production (14). Thus, the independent theatre—also referred to as the theatre of revolt—arrived on the scene (Miller 2). Since these plays were not technically allowed to be performed to an open audience, these theatres would allow only subscribing members to view the production so that they could be exempt from censorship (2). The first theatre to do so was the Théâtre Libre (Free Theatre), founded by André Antoine and a small group of other amateur actors in Paris (Ballard 15). This group of actors sought to bring naturalism to light in a community ruled by commercial theatre. They saw a potential audience for this new drama in and pursued the interest. Antoine's theatre became very popular, and soon, other amateur artists and theatre-lovers alike started to create their own independent theatres when they realized a need for them. This movement flowed from France into Germany, England, Russia, and throughout Europe, allowing playwrights such as Émile Zola, Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and Anton Chekhov—just to choose a few—to produce their works in a theater that provided them with freedom of expression and room for experimentation (Miller 1). The fact

that these playwrights are still relevant today stands as proof of the impact that the independent theatre movement made on the world.

Following right in Europe's footsteps, America's little theatre movement was prompted by not only the popularity of Ibsen's plays but also the founding of Paris's Théâtre Libre and Germany's Freie Bühne (Hatlen 137). Americans were inspired when they saw that they too could create their own companies and gain their independence again. As Theodore Hatlen states in "Independent Theatre in New York, 1890-1900," "The proponents [of independent theatre] were enthusiastic in regarding an experimental theatre as a way of rescuing the stage from meretricious and vapid fare that managers insisted in producing because they claimed it represented the public's taste" (137). New theaters were created because those in charge could not see past the dollar signs and the ticket sales. But, those truly invested in theatre can see that financial stability does not hold power over artistic need. Thanks to American founders' experiments, it became common for new theatre companies to open when a new need was discovered. To this day, the lasting impressions of this movement still inspires theatre artists to branch out on their own and create new companies.

Now, onto the interview portion of my research. I set out to discover why Nashville theatre companies have opened and their thoughts on the impact they make in their community. My first interview was with Nashville Children's Theatre (NCT)—one of the "Big Four." Ernie Nolan, the current Artistic Director, immediately and happily responded. What else would you expect from a children's theatre? From my interview, I learned that Nashville Children's Theatre was founded by The Junior League of Nashville as an amateur theatre in 1931. It was the Junior League's mission to open children's theaters in many U.S. cities ("Our Mission and History"). Before NCT was founded, there was no specific theatre for young audiences in Nashville. This

was a serious hole that needed to be filled so that new generations of actors and theatre-lovers could be both entertained and taught about the world of theatre. For three decades, NCT performed in various spaces around town before finally establishing themselves in their current space, though it has been renovated over the years. As for their transition from amateur to professional, their website explains that:

In the wake of Nashville's desegregation of schools, NCT was asked to consider programming during school hours so that children could have a shared space to explore what they had in common. NCT's volunteers decided to reinvent the institution as a professional company in order to serve that need. ("Our Mission and History")

Yet another important hole was found that needed to be filled with acceptance and open-mindedness, showing that theatre can overcome any obstacle. On their website, NCT states their mission:

Believing the culturally curious child is the future, Nashville Children's Theatre nurtures the next generation of global citizens by providing transformational theatrical experiences which reflect our evolving community, instill profound empathy, and foster personal discovery. ("Our Mission and History")

When asked how NCT actively lives out its Mission Statement, Nolan replied, "We actively do this with our programming. I believe NCT is 'the city's theatre' ... and by that... that the programming on our stage reflects the children of Nashville. We create 'transformational experiences' both in our theatre programming and our classes" (Nolan). The way that Nolan talked about his theatre, with such enthusiasm and heart, made me happy to know that there is a company of people who are passionate about teaching and working with children of all ages and

background to show them the joys of the world I and so many others love. I'm glad there are people like Nolan to teach them to love it as well.

I chose to end all of my interviews with the opening statement of this paper: "I believe that theatre is created out of necessity—that when we see a need, it is our duty to satisfy that need by any means necessary." I asked my participants of their thoughts on this assertion. To this, Nolan replied, "Nashville Children's Theatre is helping create the global leaders of tomorrow. We aren't just about the arts, but also about character education" (Nolan). If the "global leaders of tomorrow" are a bunch of theatre geeks, I can't wait to see what the future holds.

Next, I turned to Nettie Kraft, Artistic Director and one of the founders of Verge Theatre Company. Although some might consider it a start-up—having only been running for three years—it has quickly advanced to the semi-professional level. As stated in their mission, co-founders Nettie Kraft and Dr. Jim Al-Shamma are setting out to:

[produce] stimulating, affordable theater for Nashville. Providing opportunities for theater artists to express themselves, especially young women. Bringing small budget, topical, raw, representative, risky, Chicago-style theater to Nashville. (Verge Theatre Co., "About Us")

I believe they have done well to accomplish their goal of providing young women opportunities in theatre. In the last two years, Verge has teamed with Belmont University to produce *Three Sisters* and *As You Like It*, both featuring strong female leads. From their Facebook page, I could see that the majority of the plays within their own seasons, too, feature prominent roles for young women ("Verge Theatre Company"). These plays "offer semi-professional experiences for

young artists [especially young women], helping to build their resumes and expand their skill set” (Kraft). When asked why she was compelled to create Verge, Kraft replied:

I saw many young artists in Nashville, many artists period, who seemed to be lacking in opportunities to grow and experience different styles of theater. I was tired of seeing *Steel Magnolias* and musicals. I thought the energy and risk of Chicago storefront theater would be useful here. Then when these young artists moved to a different market, they would be more prepared or, better yet, we create a market here, with room for everyone, and our talent doesn’t drain to another market. Why not here? (Kraft)

I agree. I have seen *Steel Magnolias* quite enough. I also agree that Nashville needed something that wasn’t so *Nashville*; and, according to Kraft, it needed a twist from Chicago. I have witnessed several Verge productions and agree that this company produces plays that are unlike others that Nashville companies provide. But, an experimental twist is not the only hole that Verge has filled in the Nashville community. When asked how Verge actively lives out its mission, Kraft spoke right to the core of my research: “We keep our ticket prices low so that money doesn’t have to be a barrier to seeing art. We will let you in no matter what. We also do not want to censor sensitive topics. We want to be free to produce what the time calls us to” (Kraft). She has created a theatre that looks for holes with every production they take on. This is a mindset I would like to take with me into all of my theatrical pursuits. The world is almost never without a need for something; maybe I and my company can be the one to satisfy that need. With Kraft’s insight in mind, I look forward to Verge’s—and my own--upcoming season.

Again, I asked the question of necessity-- her thoughts on her duty as an artist to satisfy the needs we discover. I also asked about some of the obstacles she faces when trying to put this duty into action. To this, she replied:

I agree completely. That's how we started. I saw a need and we created Verge. We satisfy the need for opportunity and more seats at the table through our theater. As for barriers that get in the way? Money. And time. But mostly money. I work as many jobs as I can feasibly do well and put some of my own money into it when I can. I try to allow people to help. We will expand into grant territory next year. I haven't been paid by the company ever because I'd rather others get up to a better wage before I. We've expanded the Board to help delegate some duties so I'm not doing them all. It's good to have friends. (Kraft)

In a theatre community as tightly knit and supportive as Nashville's, I'm sure friends aren't hard to find.

My last interview was with Purpose Players, a recent start-up theatre company. Brothers Sumner and Sheldon McMurtry co-founded the company in 2015. As expressed in their Statement of Purpose:

Purpose players is a theatre company that donates one-hundred percent of its profits from ticket sales to charity. This charity changes with each show, thus giving each show a unique purpose. Hence the name, "Purpose Players". Our mission is to use theatre to give back to the community, while also providing a learning environment where people of all backgrounds can educate themselves in all aspects of the arts. (Purpose Players, "About Us")

In their current run of *Ramona Quimby*, all ticket sales will benefit the Fannie Battle Day Home. As described in the Facebook event page for the play, "their story began in 1891 when Miss Fannie Battle saw a *need* in the community...Over 125 years later, Fannie Battle Day Home continues to serve Nashville families facing economic and educational hardships" (Purpose

Players, “Ramona Quimby”). Purpose Player’s sole mission is to find a need and donate everything they earn for every single show. Satisfying need is the reason they exist. I am sure that the charities appreciate every cent that Purpose Players contributes. And I, and so many others, appreciate the hard work that these brothers and their small group of volunteer actors put into their productions. The group reminds me of Théâtre Libre. Not only because they are performing “free theatre”—or theatre for free—but because they are the first of their kind in Nashville, at least to my knowledge. In this community, they are truly a *new* kind of theatre.

There has never *not* been need in the world. The world has needed hope, joy, nostalgia, memories played out, stories told, entertainment, distraction, reality, faith, success, community, feeling a part of something bigger than oneself, love. Theatre can provide all of these things. It *has* provided all of these things at one time or another. And, it will continue to provide and satisfy these needs and more as the world evolves into one day, hopefully, a better place. For this to happen, members of the theatre community and audiences alike must support and cultivate all status of theatre if start-ups are to become semi-professional and professional theatres. There is a need for all three kinds at all times if the theatre community and city itself is to grow, learn, and change from the influence of one another. From this research, I have learned that no matter if I continue to act-- if it is in professional theatre or a start-up, or if start my own--or if I never pursue theatre at all, I will always look for holes that need to be filled. Nashville is my home—for now, at least. I will strive to look for ways to make it whole.

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